REALIZING RELIGION

Shoemaker

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by

Dr. John H. Ness, Sr.

REALIZING RELIGION

C'est beau, murmure-t-il. Pourquoi ne suis-je pas un d'eux?

TOLSTOI.

REALIZING RELIGION

S. M. SHOEMAKER, JR.

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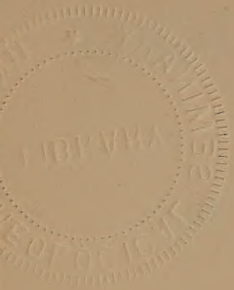

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TO
THE FRIEND,
OFT-QUOTED IN THIS BOOK, WITH GRATITUDE FOR
A RARE COMPANIONSHIP

FOREWORD

This little book grew out of a spiritual friendship. It contains substantially the ideas which passed between two persons frankly considering spiritual matters in conversation and correspondence, selected and arranged, of course, for more orderly presentation. My friend underwent, in a comparatively brief time, a renovation of life, a change in radical ideas, a conversion. I do not give this as a narrative, partly because that is an extremely difficult thing to do, and partly because I have hopes that my friend may see fit to give the more intimate account.

It would not have occurred to me to record in this way the series of thoughts which made possible a vivid religious experience, had they not seemed to come as such a healing discovery to this person. Knowing the slight hold which the orthodox way of thinking has upon those who are not among its adherents, I confess myself to having felt some surprise when I found that this very old group of ideas—for this I recognize that they are—came with such novel and helpful force to a *very modern person.* I realized that there must be many others hungering, too, to have spiritual needs met, who might be helped by these few essentials simply put. For while in a sense unique and unlike anyone else I ever met, as

all strong personalities are, my friend is also peculiarly the child of this age, holding its best, yet many of its typical ideals—advanced, forward-looking, radical, splendid.

One may trace in the quotations from letters all but the first stage of the development, which was this: a superb and conquering self-assurance, melting under a growing spiritual aspiration into conscious inadequacy, the increasing sense of sin and later the serpent putting up his head for one final attack, a deep hunger for rebirth, the actual discovery of Christ in conversion, and the search for means to keep this experience alive.

I have quoted much from others older and wiser than I. Hardly a page but has upon it the thought or the actual words of William James, who did so much as a great scientist to give the world a reassuring feeling about religion in general, and of my friend, Dr. Samuel McComb, who has not only observed, but greatly used, the power of religion to free people in bondage. If in places the book is too dogmatic, too personal, or in error, I am sorry. I can only hope that it bears the marks of sincerity.

Few will bring to these thoughts a more generous mental equipment or a more finely balanced proportion of the intellect which guides, the emotions which impassion, and the will which concludes, than did the person to whom they were first given. And they could not possess greater freedom from prejudice, and a fairer willingness to face facts about them-

selves. Yet the longings and struggles and problems and victories through which this person came are those of aspiring men and women of all temperaments and talents. I write this book for modern people, who share in some measure the background and general outlook of my friend, in the hope that some of them may be led or helped by it into hitherto unknown experiences of the larger life of the spirit, which are neither old nor new, but eternal among the children of God.

S. M. S., Jr.

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CHAPTER I

THE PRESENT NEED OF RELIGION

It is nearly half a century since Henry Drummond said that "the amount of spiritual longing in the world" was "absolutely incredible." The fact has not changed. Those who deny it are not in possession of all the facts, they do not know human life at its deeper springs, or they are themselves too shallow to feel these profounder needs. Talk of a general revival in religion is always bold prophecy, and we have often misread the signs of the times; but that now in many quarters there are increasing numbers of individuals who hunger for the things of the spirit must be evident to all. The very hammering of the Church, of which we have had so much lately, is a knocking at the doors. "Officials and leaders," says Dr. W. E. Orchard, "can have little idea of the craving for a catholic Christianity that is working among the rank and file: mainly because it generally voices itself in vague discontent, the poor souls not knowing quite what is the matter with them, and rushing around to all the new cults in turn in a vain search for what they are quite unaware catholic Christianity amply provides."[1]

[1] "The Outlook for Religion," p. 266.

The reason is not far to seek. It must be confessed that a church is often a very uninspiring group of people. A lot of us do not trouble overmuch about the implications of our religion, beyond ordinary, church-going decency. There has never lacked a succession of saintly persons within our fold—convincing, spiritual people—but they are sparse. For the most part we are "nice, reasonable people"—not very apostolic, not very thrilling—certainly in no danger of being fanatical. Very few of us go anything like as far as Christ might reasonably expect us to go; and our timidity makes us insipid to look at, so that people outside do not care to become one of us. Many are like the church members who, Samuel Butler says,[1] would be "equally horrified at hearing the Christian religion doubted, or at seeing it practiced."

The modern mind is restless and easily bored. It is also intensely individualistic. Everyone has his "own religion," and nearly everyone made it, or thinks he did. That phrase "own religion" covers everything from the earnest, exact, blood-bought belief of the true thinker who honestly cannot accept an orthodox position, to the shoddiest excuse of the loose-living rake, who, dodging all moral responsibility, throws this up as a bluff. But to say it's your "own" puts it beyond attack—and supposedly beyond change.

And of course this is a scientific age, and rumors

[1] "The Way of All Flesh."

have reached us concerning what Darwin did to Genesis, and Huxley thought of certain miracles, and higher criticism did for the rest of the Bible—so that these are reasons enough to cast suspicion upon religion, and one can be done with it and bundle it overboard. There are lots of people who have only just caught up to scientific ideas a quarter of a century old. And then, as Romain Rolland says, "Faith is one of the feelings which a too civilized society can least forgive: for it has lost it, and hates others to possess it."[3]

Finally, there is a certain amount of unblushing selfishness in the modern make-up which kicks at the restraints of religion. Christianity makes people free, perhaps, but it is freedom in part by limitation; and we prefer doing as we choose. One is led to feel that a good many of the doubts and intellectual difficulties encountered are, perhaps unconscious, masks for problems which are not intellectual at all, but moral. For when all is said and done, it is easier to believe in most of the truths of Christianity which one grasps with the mind than practically to believe, by following, those which can be proved only by living them. John Kelman says that "Paganism is an elaborate device to get along without the Cross." And so is some of modern thought.

But we have been speaking of superficial things. Whatever may be keeping people away from organized religion, nothing can kill their religious instinct.

[3] "Jean Christophe."

The desire to be right with the ultimate truth of things is too insistent ever to be either silenced or satisfied by any negative or shallow answers to the religious question. With some of us not even our selfishness is strong enough to bury our aspirations wholly. "Religion occupying herself with personal destinies and keeping thus in contact with the only absolute realities which we know, must necessarily play an eternal part in human history."[4] Our very need will burst through all obstructions, and wring from life some strong, blessed secret to live by.

Whatever misery persons of the present day might experience within the ranks of religion, one cannot see that many of them are faring much better outside. There has always been a large amount of unhappiness in the world, but it seems as if our modern America had got more than its share. Look at the sheer irritability you can find in any city you know! Can you count off half a dozen really happy, really peaceful people whom you know? So many "problems," so many "complex situations." Now the thing which is striking about much of the misery one sees is that it is *spiritual* misery. It is the unhappiness of *spiritual* people very often—souls who are too fine-grained to get along without religion, yet who have never come to terms with it. It is the sadness of maladjustment to the eternal things, and this throws out the whole focus of life. Rest cures and exercise and motor drives will not help. The only

[4] William James, "The Varieties of Religious Experience."

thing that will help is religion. For the root of the malady is estrangement from God—estrangement from Him in people that were made to be His companions.

Some have broken away from all contact, public or private, with ordinary Christianity, believing that they can work things out for themselves, follow their own best instincts, and reach on the whole as good a conclusion as the professing believer, with his Bible, his prayers, and his church. At least most people have got so far as to think that something like the kind of life Christ produced is the only type that will weather the storm; and secretly or openly they would like to be like Him. But they want to be free to do it in their own way, free from religious conventions, free from the stigma of orthodoxy. Now St. Augustine said truly: "We are not born Christians, but we become Christians." "In other words," adds Dr. McComb, "Christian grace is not a development of the natural man." The natural man may be a useful, honest, and even generous person, but you need not expect to find him praying for his enemies, throwing his life away in service, loving with a burning love the lives of others, communing gladly with God, and attaining those heights of spiritual achievement which some, under God, have attained through grace—those few courageous souls in every age who take Christ at His word. It is extremely hard, and in most cases frankly impossible, for anyone to secure results which are fun-

damentally spiritual without using any spiritual means, or fulfilling any spiritual conditions. There are laws for the production of the Christ-type of life. Without heeding them it is, to say nothing more, foolish to hope for success. We are too much like Jacqueline, in "Jean Christophe," "We do not want to learn. We want to be happy in the way we want."

One thing that makes one distrust much of this self-made religion is the small yield of fruit which falls from it. It is so utterly theoretical. I remember a group of younger university professors who used to meet weekly to discuss religious questions. One after another they pared Christianity down to the bone, and rejoiced in the operation. They asked a clergyman friend of mine to come and speak for them once; and, knowing them quite well, he replied, "When I see some of you men camping on the doorsteps of some of the down-and-outs on J—— Street, I shall begin to take your religion a bit more seriously." There is a lot of palaverous optimism in these new cults, but one can find a terrific amount of unhappiness beneath it. One of the most ardent supporters of New Thought with whom I am acquainted, far superior to the rest of us in "knowledge of the Spirit" (whatever that deliciously vague and occult idea means), happens to be a most unhappy person, who has never made the most elementary adjustments for peace within his own walls. It is not that the cults are not emphasizing some-

thing important which orthodox religion has neglected, and this is just what all heresies come from; but the presentation is partial, lacks the solidarity and roundedness which we long for in our faith.

The shelves of bookstores are laden with rosy little books of affirmation. They are put out in dozens to quiet the harassed minds of modern people, with putting up salvation in simple declarative sentences. Many of these are what Dr. Francis L. Patton used to call "rosewater." They are too thin, too subjective, too lacking in intellectual and spiritual substance to meet people's needs.

Let my friend, whom I shall quote frequently in this book, speak of the intimate heart-hungers which self-made religion did not satisfy. "I want freedom to live sanely and beautifully and serenely and well. . . . I thought I had found stability after my first period of doubt a few years ago, in my personal code of ethics, my half-agnostic philosophy. But that house was not founded on a rock. My principles 'listened' well but they worked like the devil's own. It was in talking to you that I realized the horror I was passing through, and suddenly gave up that path because I saw it ending in a blank wall or worse." One is reminded of a very old verse: "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."[5] And complete honesty would bring forth from many as frank a confession of their failure to find any help

[5] Proverbs 16:25.

in a religion which they are seeking to work out alone.

Every aspiring soul wants "freedom to live sanely and beautifully and serenely and well." All the fussiness and clambering of life, physical and mental uneasiness, discontent, triviality, jarring of wills within the home, that elusive and permeating unrest of our day—we know it is all wrong. Something is lacking. Somehow we have missed the way. Yes, life is complex—but we know that if our souls were simpler our lives would be better ordered. We buy and spend and travel to get away from ourselves. The trouble is within, not without. We may be dissatisfied with our surroundings, or our failures, or our handicaps. But most of all, we are "dissatisfied with ourselves."

It is clear to see what people like my friend want. They want to have life swung from the far Center. They want an anchor, a guide, a foundation. Confessing defeat, they long for a leader surer than themselves, who has trod this way before them, and trod it well. They want a great passion and a great love, something to harmonize and reconcile life, something to put good will and optimism and power into it, something to quiet their tempers and order their homes and fill them with hope and calm.

It is like telling Naaman to go and wash seven times in the Jordan to tell them that what they want is perfectly well known, perfectly accessible. All of us cling, despite all proofs to the contrary, to

the idea that we are different, and need something that others do not need, and never can be satisfied with any generally accepted ideas about religion. But this is our old pride raising its head for a last thrust. Our heavenly Father knows where we are really different.

What you want is simply a vital religious experience. You need to find God. You need Jesus Christ.

Why? If you will go with me through two more chapters you will perhaps understand.

CHAPTER II

THE FACT OF SIN

For the mind which is deeply religious, that is, which seeks to brood profoundly upon the meaning of life, no question can be more perplexing than the problem of evil. The tenacious optimism with which the mass of men cling to the ideas of a good God, a good universe, a good "final goal of things" —or at any rate *act* as though they believed in them—may be taken as strong argument for the reality of them. The upsetting question is: why evil in this world? The most obvious use of evil is as the foil against which we make moral progress, and those will find this a helpful thought who believe we were put here to wage moral warfare until our souls take on some of the iron of which righteousness is made. But it does not solve the matter. Dr. McComb says that, as for suffering, he refuses to believe that the heart of the mystery has been plucked out.

It matters little, however, what theories we hold with regard to evil: early in life we meet it as a very concrete reality, and are forced to deal with it individually. William James gives us a good start for this chapter by saying: "Evil at large is none of

your business until your business with your private, particular evils is liquidated and settled up." We are going to spend some time on those "private, particular evils."

In "A Student in Arms," Donald Hankey says, "Almost all men are slaves: they are mastered by foolish ambitions, vile appetites, jealousies, prejudices, the conventions and opinions of other men. These things obsess them, so that they cannot see anything in its true perspective. For most men the world is centered in self, which is misery: to have the world centered in God is the peace that passeth understanding. This is liberty: to know that God alone matters."[1]

Sin nowadays has such a theological smack to it, the "religion of healthy-mindedness" has got such a hold on many who would ignore the seams of life, people have heard so many sermons preached on sin in the abstract which dealt incompetently with it as it is in the concrete, that it is hard to get a hearing on sin at all. Most preachers handle sin as they would handle snakes, at arm's length and with no greater intimacy and for no longer time than is absolutely necessary. They would be better if they had dealt at first hand with a few more drunks and housebreakers; for the sins of the rest of us, while not quite so gross, are just as real and as bad, and need just as definite treatment. A man may actually be in touch with religious affairs for years and

[1] P. 189.

never come to *a sense of personal sin,* which is really the very door of religion; or connect in any way the sin against which Christ spoke so vehemently and with which He dealt, and still deals, so powerfully, with the moral blunders of his own life. This sounds like a strong condemnation of preaching, but it is a fact that many of us have done just that. Sin today is a black, Puritanic thing, part of the stately old vocabulary of the Bible or the Prayer Book, or of the ranting vocabulary of vulgar evangelists. But it is a *word,* and it is not in *our* vocabulary at all. It is too archaic and out of date. It does not fit in with modern religious ideas, and our age has to a large extent discarded it. We might echo what Matthew Arnold said of it, that sin was "not a monster to be mused on, but a weakness to be got rid of."

Now we are caught by smooth phrases like that. If "musing" means hopeless, brooding sackcloth, it is evil. But it may mean only adequate consideration, facing it as a fact where it is a fact, dealing with it as with any other reality. "Got rid of" sounds as though you could toss it off at will, as a Chinese coolie does a straw shoe when he is done with it. But do you know any way to be rid of it? Have you tried to get rid of it, and failed a dozen times? Everyone believes that sin is a problem, and not a fate, as Lowes Dickinson said of war. Some lay hold of an idea like that of Arnold's because it seems to imply a facile dismissal of the whole sub-

ject without further return to it. But, unfortunately, whether we return or not, *sin does,* for most of us. It is not a siren you can go past, and then unstop your ears and unlash your body: it is more like a living thing that follows you. Who does not know the merciless tracking down of a besetting sin?

It is sometimes objected that this sense of sin is the figment of a hypersensitive mind, and is due to abnormal fear: that really there is no such thing as sin. The good is real, evil is non-existent. To this one can aptly quote James again: "There is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality: and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth."

And if anyone remains unconvinced as to the power of sin over the lives of people, this paragraph from my friend may disabuse their minds: "I would go—in spite of all my resolutions—to a person who would gladly, kindly, cynically, and without compunction, go to Hell with me. . . . Why did you come along and stop me just as I was on my way to the devil—had practically reached there in fact, knew his lineaments so well that they are burnt upon my mind, and glimmer through the image of God I try to implant there. I can never make the fight. Right now I do not want to, but turn to the refreshing liberation of evil, shaking off the bonds of this har-

rowing, cruel teaching of yours. . . . I look into the face of sin with yearning!" That did not come from a roué or a drunkard. It came from a college graduate and a writer. Those who have themselves known the bestial joy of sliding with a shiver of ignoble freedom into sin, and

> ". . . . . felt
> Defeat run down through all their limbs"

can match every word of that with their own experience.

A man I know naively remarked that he never sinned. I suppose he meant that he never murdered anybody, nor got intoxicated, nor stole money from his father. Would that sin were always so patent as these! Probably not many with money and leisure enough to pick up a book like this are grossly immoral. But what of the spiritual meannesses which Christ condemned so much more mercilessly than He condemned sins of overt passion? The things which fell us are hypocrisy, white lies, insincerity, cruel thoughts, whispered stories of gossip, hard, biting criticism, jealous longings, pride, love of money and rivalry of other people's wealth that we would hardly admit to ourselves, curiosity, sly, lustful looks, vanity and the love of applause—all of them sins that we cherish behind an exterior so well maneuvered that no one would know we are not just as good as we look! We do not slay enemies, we just criticize them. We don't kill anybody,

we just crush them with a sneer. Our adultery is within the heart. Our subtle, disguised selfishness takes refuge behind such a sheaf of checks and loveless generosity that we almost forget how hard our hearts really are. It is easy to see why Jesus sent the harlot away with a few cautionary but kindly and hopeful words, and then spoke fire to the Pharisees. It is easy to see why the drunken brutes of the gutter get a clean conversion, and we go on unconverted. For gross sin has this one great advantage: you can't tog it up in hypocrisy and make it pass for righteousness. It is the hidden sins, hidden by the wall of conventionality and decency with which we hedge ourselves round, that put us in the class with the Pharisee.

Sin is that forbidden thing which comes knocking at your heart for admission, which your inner self rejects. All that your best self vetoes is sin for you. As human consciences differ, one must grant a certain relativity in sin, so that what is right for one man may be wrong for another. But there is a sufficient body of undisputed wrong, so that this should not perplex anybody overmuch. And, besides, we are talking about "private, particular evils"—that is, yours and mine. Never a thought lodges within you, but you willed to let it lodge. It passed for approval before the inner eye. If it entered it was invited. If it went away, it was sent away. The hypocritical Pryer, in "The Way of All Flesh," complains of the fatal ambiguity of good and evil. But

those who think simply, who through prayer learn to think as God thinks about evil, are not greatly perplexed. You can trust the inner voice if you are living in harmony with God.

If I am honest I will admit that in my very nature there is a rift, a cleavage, a division. It is Plato's white horse and black horse. It is Paul's flesh and spirit. It is Christ's God and mammon. There is eternal and unending conflict between them. And my soul is the battle field. The individual sins we commit flow from a disordered self. We might more safely ignore them were they not symptoms of a more deep-seated malady. They are the expression of a nature, a character, a will, which needs to be changed.

It is scarcely necessary to speak of the results of sin persisted in. It has "binding power, blinding power, multiplying power, deadening power." No other force can so unstring and despoil us. Its worst result is the increased capacity for sin, increased ease of sin, increased moral bluntness and irresponsibility. The wages of sin is death. Said a Russian soldier, "Now I fear neither God nor the devil. After I had stuck a bayonet into a man's stomach, it was as if something had fallen away from me."

But some reader has been longing to say, "But I am only following my impulses! Surely I am not depraved! Must I be always doing things I hate to do, and leaving what my whole being longs for? I loathe fighting with myself all the time. The con-

scientious type appalls me. The duty-driven are gloomy people. I long for something better than anything you have shown me. I long for freedom!" Yes, but remember, "freedom to live sanely and beautifully and serenely and well."

And yet everyone who has a heart left will sympathize with this cry. We all love wholesome, natural, spontaneous people much better than what W. J. Carey calls "nasty little, self-conscious religious people." All of us know pleasant pagans and interesting sinners, and wish there were more beauty in holiness. We agree cordially with this bit of verse:

GOODNESS

"I make no plea for sin, nor would call white
What God made black, nor seek to make wrong right.
But grant me this—there's ofttimes in our wrong
A passion, like the freedom of a song,
A wild abandon, a surrendered soul,
A yielding up of self, entire, whole,
The love and burning of an ardent mood
We sometimes lack in struggling for the good.

"I plead for goodness—plead as one who'd give
All else if that alone in him might live.
But this I say—Tear out that one foul weed
Of pleading with thyself, that hard-coaxed deed,
That toil of doing what thy soul abhors.
Go deeper. Let Christ come behind the doors
And change thy nature, have thine inmost heart,
And then with all His own consummate art
Remake thyself! And lo! these lesser things
Shall flow as gracious rivers from pure springs!

"All goodness, if 'tis true, is passion-filled,
Buoyant and radiant, with the whole soul willed.
Bring to it then an unwithholding mind,
And touch it with the love of humankind.
So with unstudied art thy soul shall tell
The joy of living eagerly, and well!"

I ask you to do this. Hold yourself at arm's length—you, whether you have been to church all your life or whether you never go. Take a good look at your outer self and then make an impartial report to your inner self of just what you saw. Tell yourself frankly just how much plain, black, unmistakable sin you found, and how much that has had to do with the restlessness and fretting and trifling disquietude in yourself, in the circle that swings about you—that is, the circle of your influence, and especially your home. Stand this off against complaint about other people's dispositions and circumstances, and your bank balance, and ask yourself how much you are the cause of this misery within and without. Of course we are better than many others similarly placed. That is the Pharisee's test. He found nothing amiss. Do we?

I have been seeking to sharpen the sense of personal sin. Sin alone is capable only of evil; but the human mind, however steeped in it, once it becomes awake to its own condition is capable of something better. We can repent. Probably we have often had remorse. Repentance is different. In the words of the old children's hymn,

"Repentance is to leave
The sin we loved before,
And show that we in earnest grieve
By doing it no more."

And I like to think that just about here some reader may take all this as personal, and go with ungrudging apology to someone who deserves a confession, or right some other pressing wrong that troubles them. It is natural to set things right when the heart is moved with a sense of its own sin; it is next to impossible when the sense is all of the other fellow's sin. The rest of this little book may mean something if you do that, bringing to it a heart cleansed by confession. It may mean absolutely nothing if here some generous, spiritual impulse is disobeyed.

But we have awakened in more or less recent times to another phase of this subject of sin, without which any treatment of the matter is incomplete. Through generations Christians knew only a personal righteousness, and a personal salvation. Religion was conceived of as a power which made more endurable what was unendurable, and enabled a man to stand up against the circumstances of life, badger him as they might. Religion was thought of principally as an ameliorative and alleviating force *to be applied to a man's situation as it was.* There are uncontrollable asperities in life: religion is a refuge from them. To use a figure, religion made it possible for a man to live in a leaky house, and keep

smiling whether or not he was wet and cold. But we have got far enough now to know that there are *some* houses that can be torn down, and decent ones put in their places, and that we have not completed our Christianization of life until we have Christianized its circumstances and surroundings, as well as its attitudes. There has been a lot of nonsense talked by religious people about resignation, when the virtue needed was fierce rebellion instead; for there is much in the organization of our social lives which is temporary, and can be abolished to the great relief of countless people. It is no longer possible for us to tell a man that when he has built himself a character he has done his complete duty. He has made the proper start, but he has now to be introduced to himself anew as a member of a society whose blessings he shares, and for whose ailments he must bear his own share of responsibility.

To the modern social-minded Christian original sin appears as consisting, in a measure, of being born a party to things as they are. We are from the beginning thrust into a society unfairly organized, warped, repressed, stultified. Our leisure and our luxury lie heavily upon the backs of those who view these things as in a distant and forever unattainable paradise. Try as we will to prove in argument, or demonstrate in life, that we have no share in these wrongs, we have it nevertheless, by virtue of being born into this human family. And if in one's consciousness of sin there is no sense of burden for the

misery of the world, if in our repentance and renewed resolve there is no increased intention of giving ourselves without stint to those agencies which are attempting to bring about a better day—then we may put down our regrets as piously subjective, too timid really to wish for real reforms, and based upon something less than the fearless vision of a Christian order which Jesus called the Kingdom of God.

It was the consciousness of personal sin which drew from my friend these pathetic and tremendously healthy words: "Oh! to be made over in the Spirit! I want a rebirth, but it comes not in one agony. Oh! how I want freedom from these deadening doubts, from this horrible, haunting sense, no, *knowledge,* of sin—this hopeless self-hatred and suffering! . . . My eyes are so beclouded with conscious sin that I cannot see the light. I hope the redemption will come."

And Dr. McComb, whose skill at helping people in spiritual need, makes him one of the marked religious forces of our day, has said: "At the threshold of the spiritual life stands the dark and sinister figure of sin." But he has said this also: "To realize the meaning of sin in feeling and in thought is not the mark of a sick soul, but rather the sign of return to spiritual health."

CHAPTER III

WHAT IS CONVERSION?

If you want a comprehensive scientific definition of conversion, William James has given us a good one: "The process, gradual or sudden, by which a self, hitherto divided and consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy, becomes unified, consciously right, superior, and happy." That will bear rereading and study. Harold Begbie puts it more categorically and simply when he says, "Conversion is the only means by which a radically bad person can be changed into a radically good person." It is thus a breach, a breaking off, a turning, a change. It is a period put to the past which we reject, and an entrance into a new life which we adopt with enthusiasm.

The gloomy old writer of Ecclesiastes was a glorious poet and an inveterate pessimist. He says some very skeptical things about human life which make his spirit seem closely parallel to that of the modern materialist. In one place he laments, "That which is crooked cannot be made straight." Here is the word of the militarist who says that war is "inevitable"; of the practical person who allows some compromise with principle as necessary in getting

on; of the large number of persons who think filthy jails and punishment the best we can do for criminals. This is pessimism *par excellence.* Everyone rejects it who has any faith in the future of mankind.

But do we so decisively reject it as regards ourselves? Do we not rather quietly assume that we have done about all the fundamental changing that is possible for us, in spite of what "crooked" there may be left in us? How large a majority of those who pray week after week, "that we may ever hereafter serve and please Thee in newness of life," or "that we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life," go home irritable and selfish still, keep up some worldly habit, settle back in defiance of greater aspirations, accept again the terrible old binding conventions—too spineless to do "something loving and something daring"—and then come and pray likewise the next week? Henry Churchill King tells us that "we develop power or character not by general striving, not by resolving in general, but only by definite, concrete applications in definite relations. . . . General self-denial and general surrender to God which involve no particulars are fruitless enough." And while in the slums religion is constantly regenerating markedly evil characters, in the churches and in that large group of religious people outside them, the fact that we are not changing proclaims loudly that, whatever religion can do for roughs, actually it does very little to improve radically its more constant devotees.

What does this mean? It does not mean that religion is any the less able to save conventionally decent people, but it means that our particular kinds of sins are peculiarly insidious, peculiarly inaccessible to the regenerating influence of religion. It means that we are as badly in need of conversion, perhaps, as the wife-beater and the thief—only we are not so much aware of it, and so we are not in a frame of mind where conversion can get at us. Augustine was converted from a life of open shamelessness, and so was Jerry McAuley. But John Ruskin, surely, was ever free from debauchery; yet he felt the need of conversion, and experienced it. And Francis of Assisi, contrary to common opinion, was not, I believe, licentious, but was converted from what seems like a rather bad case of loving to have a good time.

Now the ability to change people is the unique possession of religion. Compared with the amount of regeneration achieved by merely human effort and influence, it is infinite; there is vastly more of it, and it has more to make it last. Ethical teaching may accomplish something, or may more often not, as you will hear from many a weary Confucianist, sated with precepts and longing for power. (And it is only fair to take a thoroughgoing ethical system to judge of its success or its failure; in America we are so set round with the unconscious influences of Christianity that we may produce some characters apparently by ethics alone which owe more than

they know to religion.) It is the great assurance of religion that God will always give the regeneration we want if only we put ourselves where we can receive it. When people realize sin, they *want* change—how much nobody can ever tell until he has "been there," or tried to help someone who has. No matter how long the habit has lasted, religion insists that it can be broken. No matter how warped and twisted the nature, Christianity insists that something beautiful will bloom in the sunshine of God. No matter how many years you have sat dull of hearing and lifeless in your pew, really dead spiritually, God has a great spiritual experience and destiny to which He calls you, if only you will rise up to receive it.

You may be thinking that conversion is after all not much of an event, can be psychologically explained, usually comes to more or less emotional people, and is not quite scientific enough for today. I quote Begbie again: "However science may explain the psychological side of conversion, however convincingly it may show that religion is a clumsy term for describing emotional excitement, science itself cannot and does not save the lost and rescue the abandoned. Science cannot do this; it knows how it is done, and yet cannot itself do the thing which it assures us is not a miracle; and science does not do it, does not desire to do it, for the very reason that it lacks the religious impulse which alone can accomplish the miracle." No one can read

his "Twice-Born Men," or the many instances of conversion cited by James in his "Varieties of Religious Experience," with an open mind, and doubt that conversion is a spiritual phenomenon as real as any fact that science ever established. Probably if we recoil from the idea of *our* being converted, it is due to doubt whether religion can save "a quite decent chap like me," a feeling that we are in some way superior to the need of it, or else a frank fear of consequences. Conversion partakes of a rather unconventional and unexpected side of life—vital, first-hand religion may refuse to run on worn tracks. And "religion is a fairly unpredictable affair once it gets going." But we need converting all the same. And, as for being above it, perhaps we need not fear to find ourselves in the company of Paul and Augustine and Ruskin and Tolstoi!

Tolstoi's account of his conversion is simple and moving:

"One day in early spring time I was alone in the forest listening to the woodland sounds, and thinking only of one thing, the same of which I had constantly thought for two years—I was again seeking for a God. I said to myself, 'Very good, there is no God, there is none with a reality apart from my own imaginings, none as real as my own life—there is none such. Nothing, no miracles can prove there is, for miracles exist in my own unreasonable imagination.' And then I asked myself, 'But my idea of the God whom I seek, whence comes it?' And again at this thought arose the joyous billows of life.

All round me seemed to revive, to have new meaning.

"My joy, though, did not last long. Reason continued its work. 'The idea of God is not God. The idea is what goes on within myself . . . it is not what I seek, something without which life could not be.' Then again all seemed to die around and within me, and again I wished to kill myself. After this I began to retrace the process which had gone on within myself, the hundred times repeated discouragement and revival. I remembered that I had lived only when I believed in a God. As it was before, so it was now; I had only to know God, and I lived; I had only to forget Him, not to believe in Him, and I died. What was this discouragement and revival? I do not live when I lose faith in the existence of a God; I should long ago have killed myself, if I had not had a dim hope of finding Him. I really live only when I am conscious of Him and seek Him. 'What more then do I seek?' A voice seemed to cry within me, 'This is He, He without whom there is no life. To know God and to live are one. God is life. Live to seek God, and life will not be without God.' And stronger than ever rose up life within and around me, and the light that then shone never left me again."[1]

We are told that conversion is "gradual or sudden." Augustine was finally converted by a verse in the Bible, and Saul by a vision. Moody said he could almost throw a stone from Tremont Temple, Boston, to the spot where he was converted. Such seem the most vivid, tangible conversions. But there

[1] "My Confession," by Lyof N. Tolstoi.

are other kinds as true. I once heard Dr. W. E. Orchard, in London, say that in the providence of God he had had a sudden conversion, and he hoped he would not be misunderstood if he said that ever since he had been getting over it—not getting over the conversion, of course, but getting over the idea that it had all been done then and there, once and for all. The process may be the commoner way; and if it means a constant search for new truth which is at once appropriated and lived by, and not a waiting for things to take their own course, it may also be the safer way.

But one cannot help feeling that the sudden enters into the gradual. Some of us cannot point to a day nor place where conversion took place, and to this extent—if we are indeed converted at all—we can say that it was gradual. But most of us can remember certain occasions which mark distinct progress, when an illuminating truth has been yielded to and made our own, when certain victories stand out, or perhaps one big, hard-won surrender of all to Him. To this extent it has been sudden. And what with ups and downs, some such hybrid as this may be what most of us should expect.

But can one have a conversion at will? And what must we do to have it? Well, we must want it with all our hearts and put ourselves in the way of it. God on His part has longed to win us for years. It has been we who have been unwilling. We must open ourselves to Him, and be prepared to accept

all that it will mean to be a child of God. "We cannot, indeed," declares Dr. McComb, "command the great experience, but we can supply the conditions on which the experience will inevitably be ours."

What, then, are the conditions? First, we have got to be willing to break finally with sin. It is not so much this slip or that which wrecks people's lives by destroying their wills; it is accepting evils and wrongs in themselves as inevitable, and giving up the fight. In this there can be no possible reservation or interpretation: we must embark upon the tremendous business of cleansing ourselves, through the grace of God, from top to bottom. And what the sum total of this means, together with the absolutely yielded will, is best expressed in the old idea of self-surrender to God.

Surrender of the whole self to God means the complete dedication, by deliberate act of the will, of one's entire personality to doing the will of God so far as one can discover it. Many will find this idea nebulous, and declare it meaningless; but this is because they are viewing it abstractly, and not in the concrete. Apply it definitely to the things in life that have got to stop, or to the things that ought to come in to replace them; consider that it has the most definite implications as to the way a young person will choose his life work, that the spirit of one's household might have to be radically changed were this surrender once made, that it involves nothing less than the Christianization of our lives and all the

lives that we touch, and I think it will lose any marks of indistinctness. It will mean absolute revolution of life for most people who experience it. It is a step taken in the full possession of one's freedom to act, and is a gift of oneself to God, as definite as though one handed to another man a book or a dollar which he never expected to receive again.

William James speaks with great emphasis upon this crisis of self-surrender. He says that it is "the throwing of our conscious selves on the mercy of powers which, whatever they may be, are more ideal than we are actually, and make for our redemption. . . . Self-surrender has always been and always must be regarded as the vital turning-point of the religious life, so far as the religious life is spiritual and no affair of outer works and ritual and sacraments. One may say that the whole development of Christianity in inwardness has consisted in little more than the greater and greater emphasis attached to this crisis of self-surrender."

And this is primarily the business of the will. I believe that not nearly enough has been said of the place of sheer will power in conversion—taking the Kingdom of Heaven by force. It takes will power to thrust out sin with one heave, even for a moment, and let God have place. It takes will power to accept a life-principle as exacting as that of the Gospel and to make its truth an experience instead of an intellectual conviction of which we approve, or with which we are in sympathy. It takes will to believe

any change really possible in us, especially if we are along in life, and to cling to that faith in spite of falling once or twice as people often do after conversion. This thought that conversion is, on our part, a matter-of-fact contract, that we have a part in it and work for it and that it hardly ever can come against our will, may clarify and even dignify the idea to many minds. I wish to say emphatically that, while there are often profound emotional concomitants to conversion, as often it is as cool-headed and deliberate as signing a business contract. We need not strain for heights of great feeling; nor need we be afraid that our decision is invalidated if we find our hearts beating faster than usual, or we experience a few moments of ecstasy. These are the periphery—the gift of ourselves is the essential thing.

Given, then, this readiness to yield, the open mind ("empty," as a Chinese boy well put it), the hungering soul, the penitent heart, the surrendered will, the attitude of expectation, and the sense of abysmal need, the whole life given in earnest prayer—what then? This is the highest point thus far in your soul's history. You and God are reconciled the moment you surrender. You know it. The shackles fall away. Self recedes, God looms up. Self-will seems the blackest sin of all, rebellion against God the only hell. The peace that passes understanding steals over you. By power from above, you are "unified, consciously right, superior, and happy."

This impartation of Himself to us is God's part in conversion. It is infinitely the greater part. I have emphasized man's part, because the idea has got lodged in the minds of most people that one must sit about waiting for God to arouse one by some miraculous manifestation, and I believe that we need to realize again that putting ourselves in position is a necessary condition in the great majority of cases. But when this is done, we have done our uttermost, and can do no more. Our part is to ask, to seek, to knock. His part is to answer, to come, to open. In ways which we have not guessed, He has been drawing us "with bands of love." "No man can come to me except the Father . . . draw him." He will not coerce, but He expects from us the final effort of dedication. He has had His part in it all along, ever since those first quivers of dissatisfaction in which our turning to Him began. But, by one of the mysteries of life, He has made it necessary that we should come freely, of our own wills, even while lovingly He has been exerting His irresistible pressure. Then begins the miracle, and the inflowing of that divine grace without which spiritual living is simply impossible. "His saving of men is a personal negotiation between the individual and Himself—that or nothing—and the only infallibility that we need recognize is His voice as each man or woman hears it."[2]

The testimony to the reality of such experiences

[2] P. Whitwell Wilson, "The Christ We Forget," p. 75.

as these is abundant. I shall quote from Adolphe Monod's account of his conversion:

"I saw that to expect to put a stop to this disorder by my reason or my will, which were themselves diseased, would be like a blind man who should pretend to correct one of his eyes by the aid of the other equally blind. I had then no resource save in *some influence from without.* I remembered the promise of the Holy Ghost, and what the positive declarations of the Gospel had never succeeded in bringing home to me I learned at last from necessity, and believed for the first time in my life, in this promise, in the only sense in which it answered the needs of my soul, in that, namely, of a real, external, supernatural action, capable of giving thoughts and taking them away from me, and exerted on me by a God as truly Master of my heart as He is of the rest of nature. Renouncing, then, all merit, all strength, abandoning all my personal resources, I went home and prayed as I never yet prayed in my life. A new interior life began for me. . . . Hope had entered into my heart and, once entered on the path, the God of Jesus Christ, to whom I had then learned to give myself up, little by little did the rest."

Hear my friend's account, after weeks of restless searching and dark rebellion: "Prayer strove with sin in me, and for the time sin conquered. . . . Yesterday afternoon alone here I fought out my fight, faced realities as I had not faced them for long, and saw what they meant to me, what place they held in my life. Then I went into my room, and—wonder upon wonders—really prayed—found, I believe I

can say honestly (now after twenty-four hours have elapsed while I have lived in the radiance of that moment), for the first time Christ the Saviour talking to me, present, receiving me. *Can* it be so? And as I prayed the thought came to me, as if Christ had spoken, that all my doubts of the actuality of religious facts could be laid aside in the reality of the *relation* to Christ. I realized suddenly that I might be a disciple, as really as the Twelve had been; even now that Christ as the Master, the Spirit of His mastership, still lives on earth, and Him I can follow today and here! This sounds simple to you, and is —but oh, it was a wonderful discovery to me! Christ as the Master leads me, and it is in His service that all things must be done, every act touched a little with the radiance of His glory."

My friend had a sudden experience. And too much cannot be made of these moments of illumination and transfiguration.

> "Tasks in hours of insight willed
> May be in hours of gloom fulfilled."

You ask me if it is a real conversion. And I say that it all depends upon what my friend does with it from now on, whether it is a real conversion or not. It has begun well. Dr. John R. Mott said to a group of university men who had entered upon the Christian life the evening previous, "I am not concerned this morning as to how you feel; what I am interested in is what you are going to do." Conver-

sions last when, by the means God gives, we make them last. And, finally, the "real witness of the Spirit to the second birth is to be found only in the disposition of the genuine child of God, the permanently patient heart, the love of self eradicated."[3]

[3]William James, "The Varieties of Religious Experience," p. 238.

CHAPTER IV

THE WAY JESUS CHRIST HELPS

The great contribution of Jesus to the life of the world is not ethical, but personal and spiritual. Father Tyrrel said, "Nothing is original in the righteousness preached by Jesus." One can match many of His ideas in the Old Testament, and even in certain of the ancient Chinese sages. Honor His teachings as you may; they are immensely lofty, but they are not found in Him for the first time. The difference lies in the quality He puts into the old idea, in His uncompromising obedience to it, and, more particularly, in the nature of the relationship with God which He brings to this accepted ethical ideal. What stands out as you ponder the gospels is that He who uttered these sayings is, far beyond them, the important thing. In the gospels you will not come upon a set of wholly new ideas; but you will discover a Personality which transcends all moral ideas, and from whom these high principles pour as sunlight from the sun. Jesus' *person* is the priceless gift of God to men—not His teachings, which are secondary. Principles are meaningless without personal embodiment. Granted Jesus, the teachings follow.

Did you ever consider how vastly significant a fact

it is that once in this world there lived a perfect life? We have had moral greatness elsewhere, but *in Jesus we have the one perfect thing in an imperfect world* —a tremendously striking thought when you grasp it. Twenty critical centuries have gone by in which men have sought to find a flaw in Him; but, with Pilate, the verdict is, "I find no fault in Him." What genius could have concocted this character which has withstood the moral judgment and scrutiny of mankind down through these ages, if He did not really live? He towers in sheer moral character above all "the mountain-tops of men."

Consider the issues which faced Him at His great temptation. He longed to win the world, and had He chosen the lower way He need not have waited all these years. Can you imagine Him where the rich have easy access to Him, lounging in a prince's comfort, accepting compliments from expectant office-holders—rich, successful, brutal, with a cynical leer, and those eyes (I always wonder what His eyes were like, those eyes that fell on Peter at the trial like hot, burning coals, full of disappointment and triumphant spiritual hope)—can you imagine those eyes hard, icy, perhaps bleared? It is a horrible thought, this, of a worldly Christ—but it was nothing less than this possibility which faced Him as the only alternative to the way He chose, which led, as He knew then it would, to the foot of Calvary. We are so accustomed to the infallible Christ, a Christ who, as we think, *could* do no

wrong, that it may do us good to reflect that at any one of a hundred places in His life, and especially here, humanly it might all have been different —the whole thing might have collapsed. P. Whitwell Wilson, in a strong book,[1] says, "Christ, in the temptation in the wilderness, would not exchange the whole world for His own soul. And for that soul it was the world which Satan offered." Our faith is built on a Christ who confronted crises all the way, tempted as we are, and daily made decisions which would have jeopardized our salvation had He not refused to make them in any but the way He did.

I have always loved the story of His dealing with the woman taken in adultery, because it is so characteristic of Him, and because nobody else in the world could have put so much tenderness and drama into it as He—and therefore it is finely typical of Him. Can you see the old hypocrites drag her in? They do not care for her as a person—they are merely curious about Christ's attitude towards vice. He turns away and writes on the ground. This is the only recorded time when Jesus wrote, and it was in the dust of our earth—dust which blows somewhere today in Palestine. Who can tell whether He wrote with meaning, or to hide His discomfort and uneasiness at the heartlessness of these men? "He that is without sin among you." There was none such but Himself, and He would cast no stones, though the woman, not knowing Him, may have

[1] "The Christ We Forget."

feared something sharper than stones. "Is there none left to accuse you? Neither do I accuse you. Go and sin no more." Could anything be more perfect—humanly, dramatically, spiritually? Any heart that is not warmed by a Person who could do that has lost kinship with humankind.

And the Cross. I hardly knew what it meant that the Founder of our faith died for that faith, until I stood before the almost sublime Daibutsu, at Kamakura. This vast Buddha is one of the great statues of the world, and shows the Light of Asia in a profound reverie. It is abstract, universal, elusive, fascinating, the *"vita contemplativa"* made bronze. I loved it as great art. But how remote, how detached, how impossible, even for the unimpassioned East, today! My mind turned inevitably to the strenuous Christ, not crouched in rapture over a thought, but stretched in passion on a Cross—that Cross which was the supreme moment in the history of God. T. R. Glover says, "The Cross is the outcome of His deepest mind, of His prayer life. It is more like Him than anything else He ever did. It has in it more of Him. Whoever He was, whoever He is, whatever our Christology, one fact stands out. It was His love of men and women and His faith in God that took Him there. . . . Only by the Cross can He interpret God, make God real to us, and bring us to the very heart of God. That is His purpose."[2] Is it nothing to you who pass by?

[2] "The Jesus of History."

Our estimate of Him must be influenced by the estimate of those who were nearest Him in the days of His flesh. "Where," asks Harnack, "can we find in the history of mankind any similar instance of men eating and drinking with their Master, seeing Him in the characteristic aspects of His humanity, and then proclaiming Him not only as the great prophet and revealer of God, but as the divine disposer of history, as the 'beginning' of God's creation, and as the inner strength of a new life!"

Jesus has filled the consciousness of the world with veneration. No thoughtful man can pass Him by; and the fool, shouting his infidelity, is aware of an abysmal inferiority, and the terrible rebuke of His life upon his own. Dr. McComb practically identifies the impact of Christ's influence upon the world with its total conscience when he says: "Each age has its own vision of Christ. In the ultimate analysis it is by this vision that all things must be tried. It represents the best conclusions of the age as to the contents of the Bible, the meaning of the world and of life; and while its decisions are not final in the sense that posterity may not advance beyond them, they are for us the measure of our apprehension of the truth." Even Renan cried, "Whatever the surprises of history, Jesus will never be surpassed."

How, then, does this figure of such intense beauty and goodness—the most precious possession of the human race in general—become personal to me, be-

come *my Saviour?* Suppose I am converted, reconciled to the God He revealed, how does He help me?

The direct moral influence of Christ upon us is quite incalculable. "To steep ourselves in Him is still the chief matter," says Harnack. And by daily communion with the Book in which He lives historically, and by daily prayer in which we have companionship with Him as He lives now beyond time, eternally the same Christ who wore our mortality, and by use of the Sacrament of the Holy Communion, slowly the outlook is enlarged, conduct is brought into line with His ideals, love for men deepens, the sense of God grows stronger, self grows less, and we are changed. It is a wondrous transformation—so silent, so gradual, so certain if we are faithful. As Vinton Dearing wrote beautifully to a beautiful mother from the trenches, "Your face is constantly before me and inspires me to do my best when the ordinary way is so much simpler." When Jesus becomes the onlooker of all our actions, before us, beside us, within us, when we come naturally to take Him into all our councils, and share all plans and dreams with Him—nay, rather seek His plans and dreams for us—the very trend of life is lifted, and in a faint way we become "like Him."

If our love for Him be true, it has within it "the expulsive power of a new affection"—so that He and sin cannot dwell in the same heart side by side, but He must expel it and dwell there alone. His

effect on sin is simply the effect of light on darkness: they cannot exist together. This may sound theoretical, and there will be times when we doubt that He has any power over sin. If we will pay the price in prayer and Bible study and sacramental communion, however, we shall discover that the power of sin is gradually being broken, and companionship with Christ is becoming ever more and more of a power-giving reality. And I find that He gives me a tremendous *hopefulness* about myself. What is the forgiveness of God, which Christ makes real, but simply the assurance of a past wiped out and a new chance? Sin is strong, whether one be converted or not; but it never means despair when you have Christ. Then I believe that there are times

". . . when the strife is fierce, the warfare long,"

when human endurance and resistance have broken down, in which He actually, supernaturally reaches down into my life, drives the evil from my soul, and plants there some beautiful thought which carries me out beyond the deadly confines of sin.

Christianity means only one thing: it means relationship with Christ. Those persons, those churches, those lands, which lay the chief stress on Him are those which spiritually arrive. Writes my friend, who has discovered Him now, "Better than the adjurations of Paul, better than the Sermon on the

Mount, which I have ever striven to follow, better than all the strife and trial—just Christ Himself, the Spirit who spoke to me, and speaks to me now, the Teacher, the Doctor, the Friend, the Master whose service is happiness supreme—why yes, God! All of life is like a prayer, and a great joy and a great singing."

What does it mean to accept Christ? Nothing humiliating, or superstitious, or irrational. You allow Him to set in motion a relationship between you. You enter upon a new companionship. Sherwood Eddy defines a Christian as "one who is living up to all the meanings he finds in Christ." If there are theological problems which hinder, clear them up as you can, remembering always their relatively inferior importance to the "reality of the relation to Christ." Take as much as you can, and work for more. Believe all you find you can, and don't trouble too much about the rest. Whitwell Wilson says that "some received Him as a prophet, and received the prophet's reward: or as a righteous man, and had the righteous man's reward. He did not denounce these Unitarians. He only made it clear that according to their faith would it be unto them. The limit of blessing was with them, not with Him. They take *part,* where He offers all." Some people must in honesty remain Unitarians until they have an experience of Christ which cannot be interpreted in terms of a merely human Christ. Seek the deeper experience.

In closing this chapter, I would call your attention to this thoughtful paragraph from Dr. Orchard:

"Faith in Christ entails a perfect combination of intellectual conviction, voluntary choice, and sense of final certainty. Men cannot accept that which appears to be intellectually nonsense; theological conviction does not necessarily move the heart; there is a sort of pragmatic choice which brings no sense of security. When a man chooses Christ he has to do so on the absolute basis that Christ is what he means by truth, and that Christ's career is what he calls success."[8]

[8] "The Outlook for Religion," p. 190.

CHAPTER V

WHAT RELIGION OUGHT TO DO FOR US

"The wind bloweth where it listeth. . . . So is everyone that is born of the Spirit"—which simply means that wherever a vital, first-hand religious experience takes place, no man can tell exactly in what direction its consequences will tend. Sometimes it will take a highly original turn, perhaps "driving him who had it into the wilderness, often into the literal wilderness out of doors, where Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, St. Francis, George Fox, and so many others had to go," or else into the inner wilderness of the soul. Sometimes there is a naive and wholesome sense of having made a totally new discovery, as seems to have been the case with Tolstoi when he said, "I have been brought to a great idea, to the realization of which I feel myself capable of consecrating my whole life. This idea is the foundation of a new religion, the religion of Christ, but purified of dogmas and mysteries." It broke on him as for the first time. Yet how many of us more ordinary individuals, burning under the sense of having found Christ, have shared with him

this intense and lofty desire of capturing the world with the refined essence of the Gospel? In another place he said, "Strange as it may seem, I had after eighteen centuries to discover these rules (the Sermon on the Mount) as a new thing." There was a lot of smiling done about H. G. Wells's having "discovered God" a few years ago; but it is quite a natural thing to feel, and so to act or write, under such circumstances, that you have been let in on a special secret—a secret of momentous concern to mankind.

So if, after a conversion, your religion drives you to do something out of the ordinary, different from the usual run of Christians, take it as an earnest that something real has happened. One need not strive for theatrical peculiarities; but do let us get beyond the notion that Christianity must always produce one kind of submissive, matter-of-fact, regular-issue people. It would be well for the spiritual lives of all of us if we dared to let our religion smash a few more conventions. Christ ought, first of all, to break up the clods of our soil, free us from every old, binding notion about life that clings to us, and give us a perfectly fresh start and outlook. I notice the spontaneity of the adventurous explorer in men habitually in communion with Him.

Happiness is so much a matter of the ineradicable element in personality, and is brought to differing persons in such a host of ways, that it seems presumptuous to extend a promise to all alike: "Christ

will make you happy." And there is a professionally light-hearted type, that is boring, that seems just a bit untouched by the spectacle of tragedy in this world, almost as though whistling to keep up his spirits—and him we do not wish to imitate. But there is a sense in which we want peace, joy, calm. Is there in Christ any power to make people radiant, even when they face all the facts, and all the returns on life are in? One is forced to speak out of his own heart. I believe that there is. Our primary responsibility is, after all, ourselves, whatever we are able to do for others over and beyond that. And it is not selfish to seek for ourselves practical salvation, which we can use also for the benefit of others. But practical salvation brings happiness. If one has found in Christ the cure for his ills and needs, he ought to be contented in spending and being spent to make His kingdom come. Human testimony is the only valuable thing in these matters, and I am going to make a full quotation from a pamphlet by Dr. Sherwood Eddy, called "The Maker of Men":

"I remember a day twenty years ago when that verse (John 4: 14) broke into my life like a pent-up rushing stream that had burst its dam. It was the darkest day of my life. I was suffering from nervous prostration and insomnia. My work was a failure and I was discouraged and rebellious. The whole world looked black—and blue. That morning I cried to Him to show me the way out, for somehow I had missed the way. My life had been

filled with over-work, rather than overflow. It had been one of strain and worry, not of peace and joy. Somehow I had missed the fresh gospel, that glad good news of the larger life, and I cried to Him to show me the way out from that wilderness, just as Hagar had done when her son was perishing of thirst. And that day He showed a very fountain of life-giving joy, the fountain of life itself. And this is what He said, 'Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst.' On that morning twenty years ago I began to drink of the deeper springs of life. Before, I had been drinking of those 'broken cisterns that can hold no water.' I had gone across Europe in search of pleasure, yet somehow happiness had always eluded me. I was not satisfied and I knew that something was wrong. I had been serving two masters, God and mammon, Christ and self. But that day I came back to the fountain of Jesus Christ Himself. There have been failures since. One could spend pages telling of these failures, but He on His side has kept the promise these twenty years. For in all the years since that morning, by His grace, there has not been one hour of despair, not an hour of darkness. There have been intellectual problems that one could not solve, the pressure of the problem of evil, the problem of pain and human suffering, and unjust social conditions, but at the center there has always been a satisfying certainty of peace and joy. So full and so satisfying has Christ's presence been, so constant and growing, that the doubts and difficulties and problems lie out on the fringe of life. One thing I know, that Jesus satisfies. Sick or well, at home or absent, in apparent success or apparent failure, so long as we drink, we surely shall never thirst."

If religion has not done something like this for us, there is maladjustment somewhere.

Christ certainly has a quarrel with that exclusive and inordinate pursuit of *things*—motors, clothes, money, and the objects it will buy—which destroys the soul and the soul-values. It is no sin for women to have nice clothes, but oh! the triviality and waste of paying so much attention to them! One can be starchy and trig without yielding one's whole soul to an engulfing materialism and the bondage of silks and styles! It is the same with so many men and their business. All the rest is of no consequence. The fine eye for personality, the spark of intellectual curiosity once raised in college, the passion for causes and ideals—all is swallowed in gigantic commercialism. Dr. John Kelman, describing a certain hill outside Jerusalem, says, "If this be indeed the site of Calvary, Christ was crucified on a wedge of ground between a military and a commercial road."[1] And He has been crucified there ever since.

Nekhlyudov, in Tolstoi's "Resurrection," says: "If we once admit—be it only for an hour or in some exceptional case—that anything can be more important than a feeling of love for our fellows, then there is no crime which we may not commit with easy minds, free from the feelings of guilt." One feels the old mighty Tolstoi speaking—and a Greater than Tolstoi. And this mark of the truly regenerate is so broad that it can express itself in any tempera-

[1] "The Holy Land," by Fulleylove and Kelman.

ment, and so vital that all must seek some strong phase of it until they find it in their own lives, knowing that without this they are without that for which Christ came into the world. "If a man has not the love of God shed abroad in his heart, he has never been regenerated," cried Moody, whose greatest praise of Drummond was that he "lived continually in the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians." The measure of a man's inward Christianity is the depth of his faith in the goodness of God and the sufficiency of Christ. The measure of his outward Christianity is his degree of daring to apply the doctrine of love—the most revolutionary doctrine ever enunciated—in all relationships. The man of the world plays safe with people, fencing himself round with fortifications against injury, hatred, loss of property or position; the man of Christ freely, foolishly, incredibly trusts people for something better than the best there is in them, committing himself and his to them without reserve or suspicion. The hardest thing to find on this earth is a person who will love first and investigate afterwards. Yet the great saving souls of history, and the very saints of our own day, have been those who believed that any success without love was failure, and any failure with love was success in disguise—for "love never faileth." One can cite hundreds of instances during the Boxer massacres in China where this was practiced; but we have left it to the missionaries. "If things are ever to move upward," says James, "some-

one must be willing to take the first step and assume the risk of it. No one who is not willing to try charity, to try non-resistance, as the saint is always willing, can tell whether these methods will or will not succeed. When they do succeed they are more powerfully successful than force or worldly prudence. Force destroys enemies, and the best that can be said of prudence is that it keeps what we have in safety. But non-resistance when successful turns enemies into friends, and charity regenerates its objects." Love is the only thing that produces people who are thus ethically venturesome. Am I making Christianity extreme? No. It was Jesus who put that element of the extreme in Christianity. "He that can receive it let him receive it." We have gone sound asleep over the Sermon on the Mount!

"The great achievement of Christ is that henceforth religion by itself is imperfect. Its end is the blessing and the redemption—moral, social, and physical—of humanity. It is this which makes the Christian religion a new and at the same time a unique religion." Granted an earnest effort to apply this principle of love to personal dealings, what does it mean for one's life in the large? It gave Father Stanton fifty years among the poor of London without pay, and he said, "I would lay down my life for the roughs!" It thrust Pitkin into the heart of China, and when he was soon to be murdered he sent a message to his wife in America to prepare his son, then four years old, for service in the field

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where his own labors were cut off. *That* is love. It has laid hold on middle-aged people, and sent them into unaccustomed fields. And it has kept many in good spirits who had to stand by in their own home. For some it means dazzling heroism in unknown places, for some heroism no less dazzling which can brave the commonplace. No one can say what it means for another, except this: mediocrity never expresses the love of God, for the love of God is a passionate thing. Some of us need to pray the prayer of George Whitefield: "Lord Jesus, help me to do or suffer Thy will. When Thou seest me in danger of *nestling*—in pity—in tender pity—put a *thorn* in my nest to prevent me from it."

"Penetrate a little beneath the diversity of circumstances, and it becomes evident," says Sainte Beuve, "that in Christians of different epochs it is always one and the same modification by which they are affected: there is veritably a single fundamental and identical spirit of piety and charity common to those who have received grace, an inner state which before all things is one of love and humility, of infinite confidence in God, and of severity for oneself, accompanied by tenderness for others."

Christianity, occupying itself with rooting out the causes of misery in the world as well as with alleviating its effects, has in these recent years put a sharp point on social questions. Not only regard for abstract justice, but that peculiar solicitude for the

welfare of the individual which characterized Christ Himself, has been at the bottom of this movement. Many have espoused this cause who reject the cause of Christ; yet it is essentially the cause of people bred in Christian lands, and who are at most only a very few paces removed from the religion of Christ themselves. Labor conditions, factories, wages, profits, the minutiæ of industry, the very fundamental social and economic ideas of our life, must come before the bar of Christian scrutiny. Now, honest and earnest as has been the sincerity of those who have spent their lives trying to bring about adequate readjustments of this kind, and Christian as many of them are, one needs to be only slightly acquainted with men and women today to realize how large is the number of those who, by the support of this splendid, but external, cause of social justice, have gone round the specific and private issues of what they are pleased to call "personal religion." In other words, if I am busying myself with the affairs of public, and especially economic and social, well-being, if I am reasonably generous and reasonably public-spirited and reasonably concerned about the general status of the working-man, and particularly if I go further than this and become very liberal or very radical in my views about such things, I may cut a few corners in my own life, and not be held too strictly accountable. How does my being religious help the victim of an unjust social system?

Now there is place for many books to be written

urging and directing people into deeper thought and more drastic action in these interesting and perplexing and tremendously important fields of social betterment; this book is written primarily to help people to find and keep "personal religion." (And just here I should like to record my profound distrust of any religion which is *not* personal.) I should like to try to point out the connection between these two questions of such momentous concern. No one is stupid enough, I suppose, to believe that by getting everybody's soul saved individually we shall inevitably get a Christianized social order, *ipso facto;* neither should anyone be so foolish as to think that by getting wages and hours adjusted, factories sanitary, or any other exterior circumstances and relationships congenially arranged we shall of necessity get men and women and children into fellowship with Jesus Christ. Circumstances help; but they will not do it *all.* You and I are seeking to give something useful to the world, something it will care to keep. Now one may have perfect economic independence, and yet fail utterly to find any meaning in life. The greatest, and in the end perhaps the only permanent, service one can render to another is to help him on with his character. Poor human means fall very short in this; if you doubt this, try it with any person long in the grip of an engulfing sin. "Influence" is weak and temporary and local enough at best. The only thing that helps forever is God. Good legislation and good government help a great

deal; but to put meaning into your regulations, to have spirit and significance in them, you need employers and employes, rich and poor, strong and weak, with a certain *quality* of life. Somehow water never rises above its source, somehow a corrupt tree never brings forth good fruit, somehow "such as I have give I thee"—it is inexorable. The human souls that we are trying to enlarge by wider opportunity, and illuminate by broader education, and socialize by deeper sympathies, are in the end no more satisfied than we are without God.

You have done but a partial service for them when you have settled their surroundings and their education. They long, as we long, for something entirely apart from these things to put cheer and power into life, and hope into the mystery of death. And while there are those who must stand behind the scenes, in the legislatures and courts and schoolrooms and factories and offices, there must also be those who deal directly. What have you got to give? No man can give away this precious gift of the religion of Jesus Christ without having at least the beginnings of it hidden away deep within himself. In the end it comes back to the same question: *What kind of a person are you?* Are *you* bound hand and foot with selfishness and sin? Are *your* sympathies shriveled and small? Can God get through *you* into another life? Religion, if real, will thrust varying kinds of persons into these forms of direct and indirect service, according to their gifts. But, be it said,

there are all too few concerning themselves with the "personal religion" of ordinary mankind.

I want to speak of one more thing that Christ does for us. Frank Buchman calls it "the Second Touch." When Jesus put His hands upon the blind man's eyes once, he said that he saw men as trees walking. That is the state most of us are in. When He touched them again, he saw every man clearly.[2] Jesus was peculiarly conscious of individuals, peculiarly keyed to personalities. He was deeply social. Unsatisfied with friendship which touched and glanced off, He often pressed into the inner lives and experiences of people. We have seen worldly people with a gift of unusually deep friendship. The Christian eye sees beneath the externals of people, and its greatest triumph is the discovery of great interest in uninteresting people! I have seen some refined missionaries *enjoying* visits in certain houses on certain streets in China—a sight which will forever make it impossible for me to doubt the love of God or the reality of religion again. But it is just as wonderful wherever you come upon those who are pressingly aware of the individual value of others. Let us pray earnestly for the Second Touch, so that our very nature may become one which will respond instinctively to each personality God brings into contact with us.

Oh for a few more to take the Gospel literally! Must Christianity, as Jesus lived it, remain forever

[2]Mark 8:22-26.

revolutionary and a dream? Must it always be that a man who takes it seriously and follows it be called a fanatic? Must the Kingdom always be an inspiration—never a fact? Those of us Christians who let it seriously interfere with our worldly round are appallingly few; we calmly live under its banners, forgetting that its sign is a Cross. Do we look for the day—would we welcome it—when the Golden Rule shall be taken for granted as common honesty is now, and we shall find our happiness incomplete without the happiness of all mankind? If so, what are we doing but holding this day back by straddling issues as we do?

CHAPTER VI

DRIVING POWER FOR THE NEW LIFE

We have had altogether too much indefinite exhortation to pray and read our Bibles, and too little definite information as to how to do either. Sermons are full of proofs of what prayer does, and all but empty of practical suggestions which would make prayer real; we know that the Bible is a mine of gold, but we do not know where nor how to begin to dig. And we are thoroughly hazy about the need of the Church. Let us consider together these three great, primary means which God gives for sustaining the experience when the sharp lines of conversion seem to grow dim, and we wonder whether it was real or not.

First, the Bible. In the minds of many there is a cloud of suspicion, cast up very naturally by hearsay of biblical criticism, concerning the Book; and it is obvious that no one can come to it beset with these serious questionings and find much help. There is no space here to go into the matter fully, but I will make certain strong quotations from those whose integrity of scholarship is beyond question. Perhaps Adolph Harnack has done more than any other one critic to bring together the constructive

results of the late nineteenth century investigations,[1] and he has said, "As to our knowledge of the teaching and the history of our Lord, in their main features, at least, this depends upon two authorities,[2] independent of one another, yet composed at nearly the same time. Where they agree their testimony is strong, and they agree often and on important points. On the rock of their united testimony the assault of destructive critical views, however necessary these are to easily self-satisfied research, will ever be shattered to pieces." And Arno Neumann declares that "science rescues the chief contents of the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) for the life of Jesus."

Considering the gospels from a more experiential and practical viewpoint, Dr. McComb says: "We have but to place ourselves face to face with the picture of Jesus as it has been handed down to us in the gospels, and put aside for the moment whatever elements in the story we are unable to assimilate, in order to feel that we are in touch not with fancy but with fact; and learned investigations confirm the intuition of the average mind."[3] P. Whitwell Wilson, speaking of the men who set down these accounts, says[4]: "He entrusted His message to

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[1] Especially in his "What Is Christianity?"

[2] The Collection of Sayings of Jesus, and the Gospel of Mark.

[3] "Christianity and the Modern Mind," p. 42.

[4] "The Christ We Forget," p. 4.

the memory of those who loved Him through death. . . . He applied no critical safeguards. He wished nothing to survive that had not helped someone who needed help. And His confidence in the generation that slew Him was incredibly justified." What we have quoted applies to the gospels only. In this book we are seeking Jesus, and in a particular way it is "they which testify of me." Without doubt one of the surest buttresses of the truth of any religious narrative is its capacity to meet human needs.

The chief thing that I want to emphasize about our use of the Bible is not so much the way each of us shall pursue our study of it, as the setting apart of a definite time each morning for this, together with prayer. It is quite common for people to take time, at least a snatch of it, each day for a look at the Bible, but it is more often a duty discharged, perhaps, than a need satisfied or a fire kindled. The most fatal thing of all is to come at it in a hurry, or with an anxious, preoccupied mind. And, therefore, the best time in the day is the first hour of it. Frances R. Havergal said long ago that the reason the churches lacked power was that so few Christians were spending the first hour of the day alone with God. "Our sense perceptions of all kinds," says Dr. Henry Churchill King, "are far acuter in the morning."[8] One could name literally hundreds of great spiritual leaders who have considered this the most luminous and precious and indispensable hour

[8] "Rational Living."

of the day, as the study of their lives will make plain to anyone. This practice of the "Morning Watch" is the most fruitful personal habit of religion for those who use it; and were you to draw a line between the strong and the weak Christians, you would find, I believe, the cultivation or neglect of this the chief source of their difference in power. It takes dogged will to choose with unbroken regularity half an hour—less is almost always too brief a time to "get into the spirit" of it—the first thing every day. But the results will justify the effort; and granted the desire and determination to use this time daily, with the Bible open before you, you will soon make a method of study for yourself that will suit you better than anything which this book might recommend.

Lest I appear to avoid that definiteness which I said at the beginning we lacked, I want to give a few practical suggestions which one might follow. One should have the best, that is the most accurate, translation obtainable, and it is well to have some new translation, like Moffatt's; we are in danger of learning phrases rather than assimilating ideas, and the veneration of some for the King James Version is near to bibliolatry. It is good to have a marked copy where you make plenty of entries, and for this you want a wide margin, and also a fresh copy. D. L. Moody, who was noted especially for his familiarity with the Bible, "was always wearing out Bibles, covering the margins with references and notes, and allowing

them to pass freely among his friends."[6] Study one book at a time, mastering the thought of it, the plan and dominant ideas. Read what is there, not your own ideas into it. Do not read hit or miss, unsystematically; do not read superstitiously, opening anywhere and expecting to find a fruitful lesson for the day; and do not dwell too much on favorite passages, but seek to make many favorites. Read, as President Wilson urged the soldiers, "long passages that will really be the road to the heart of it," sometimes a whole book at a sitting. One may read topically, using the concordance to seek out ideas on sin, faith, prayer, the use of money, consecration, and other subjects; or biographically, as in the fascinating development of Peter from the old faults and sins found in the gospel stories of him to the might and influence of the Acts and the Epistles. The will can forge its own way, if only the purpose and the regularity be assured. Whitwell Wilson speaks as one whose Bible is his companion: "Don't worry about clergy and churches. Let them go their own way, at any rate for the moment. Read and know the Bible, and all else, including public worship, will fall into its place."[7]

Our consideration here of prayer may well begin with two reassuring paragraphs from William James,[8]

[6] "Life of D. L. Moody," by his son.

[7] "The Christ We Forget," p. x.

[8] "The Varieties of Religious Experience," pp. 516, 524.

"The appearance is that in this phenomenon (prayerful communion) something ideal, which in one sense is part of ourselves, and in another sense is not ourselves, actually exerts an influence, raises our centre of personal energy, and produces effects unattainable in other ways. . . . It would seem as though transmundane energies, God if you will, produced immediate effects within the natural world to which the rest of our experience belongs" ". . . the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself."

Whatever be one's theories about prayer, two things stand: man will pray as long as God and he exist, and the spiritual life cannot be lived without it. Dr. Johnson said there was no argument for it. People need to pray, and they pray.

But it is an art—the art of discerning God's will —and one must learn it. For prayer is more than primitive awareness of the supernatural; for us Christians it is the communing of children with Father. Sin will ever be its greatest hindrance, for sin rises up as a cloud between ourselves and God, and makes our companionship a mockery. And in the same way obedience to the Voice which speaks in prayer must ever be the condition of hearing that Voice again. We ask for what we need, remem-

bering that oftentimes "we pray for a thing and He gives us a chance,"[8] and also that the essence of prayer is not childish asking for gifts, but the eternal quest for the disposition of God towards the ways of our life. And we are praying best when we come, quite empty of request, to bathe ourselves in His presence, and to "wait upon Him" with an open mind, concerned far more with His message to us than with anything we can say to Him. And as one grows into the longing love of God for men, intercession becomes more and more a necessity, first because we can't help it, knowing somehow that the best we can ever do for those we love is to bear them up before God, and also to seek some hint from God of what He yearns to do for them through us. The prayer of confession and for forgiveness is perhaps the deepest, best prayer of all, and the one which we shall need most often if God gives us an acute sense of sin.

However necessary it be, prayer is seldom easy. "I have followed my *own* will so *prayerfully* and intensely, that I do not know how to *find* another will," wrote my friend. Sometimes the impression is vague, and we are not sure it is from God. Or there seems to be no impression at all. Now we should not seek emotional corroboration for every spiritual effect produced by God upon us, and He

[8] Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, whose book, "The Meaning of Prayer," is one of the most helpful ever written on this subject.

often pours power into us when we "feel" nothing. Very clear leadings come seldom to most people. Some of us are too sinful or too stupid to be guided by revelation, we must be guided by necessity. And God is constantly using persons or events to direct us when our wills are at too great discord with His for us to be guided directly. There is a temple in Kyoto with 500 images of the goddess of mercy, having in all 33,333 hands. This would be a faint representation of God's desire to come into our lives, to guide us, to help us. Trusting Him, then, we must pray on, for we can do no other. And if we be faithful, we shall soon find that the reality of the experience of prayer far outweighs the reality of the questionings which make us doubt it.

Romain Rolland says, "Only the mean of spirit never need to pray."

One word more about the time of prayer. Some find occasion for intercessions at noon, most of us pray regularly morning and night, and briefly through the day. If the reader will pardon a personal testimony, the time when the writer began to have a hitherto unknown power in his own life, and some slight influence spiritually in the lives of others, coincides exactly with the time when he changed the chief time of prayer from the last thing at night to the first thing in the morning. I plead again for the keeping of the "Morning Watch"—coming fresh to God with the day's plans unmade, submitting first our spirits and then our duties to Him for the

shedding of His white light upon both. "To steam full-speed through icebergs is irreligious. To start the day without one thought of our Maker is to invite catastrophe."

Auguste Sabatier says that he understands by prayer:

"No vain repetition of certain sacred formulæ, but the very movement itself of the soul, putting itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the presence—it may be even before it has a name by which to call it. Wherever this interior prayer is lacking, there is no religion; wherever, on the other hand, this prayer rises and stirs the soul, even in the absence of forms or doctrines, we have living religion."[10]

Thus far this book has concerned itself almost entirely with religion as an inward, individual experience, an affair between the soul and God, without the interference of any human being. And this I conceive true religion fundamentally to be. When religion becomes only an orthodoxy, and we enter into it by a rite instead of by an experience, it is in a perilous condition, as the spiritual level of those churches which minimize conversion will abundantly testify. But there are certain things which an isolated religious life misses.

First, I would personally testify once more to the power which holding by a tradition, a ceremony, a custom of church-going, has to fire the inner soul

[10] "Outline of a Philosophy of Religion."

with ambition to attain the experience without which these other things are so nearly meaningless. Not a few of us have caught up to a Christian heritage in the Church by finding a vitalized religious experience which did not come during the early stages of that formal allegiance. Did we hold the possibilities of conversion in plainer view, many of the uninspired devotees might reap a richer blessing than we think them capable of.

The isolated period of religion does not last. Jesus came back from the wilderness, and Paul from Arabia, to the people. One of the normal human instincts after a decisive conversion is the craving for companionship, someone with whom to share the mysteries of the great secret, "someone who understands"—that God-given blessing upon the earth—and I have known some to be very lonely just for lack of this companionship. In spite of all the apathy and coldheartedness and carelessness about the religious discoveries and struggles of others in the Church today, I believe that originally this was the *spiritual* impulse, entirely apart from considerations of ecclesiastical order or the founding of a brotherhood by Jesus, which welded Christians together in the days when the Church had martyrs in it. The value of united prayer and worship, of inspiring and instructing a group bent on one object, the constant impact of the words and the interpretation of Jesus, has often been dwelt upon, and need not be repeated here.

The Church is the family of God's children. Here, under the leadership of men trained for this service, we are led in our devotions, and instructed in our practice of the spiritual life. At their hands we receive, first the sacrament of baptism, which is our entrance into Christ's fold, and later the Holy Communion, which was the Lord's last gift, willed to us all, before His death. Many in these days are turning to this sacrament for comfort and power. Our prayers are our reaching up to God; this sacrament is His reaching down to us. Whatever frame of mind we are in, however indisposed to worship, too sinful to pray, too utterly weak and demoralized to make one bit of spontaneous spiritual effort, as too often we actually are, yet Christ is there, objectively present by His promise, coming to us when we can hardly whip ourselves up to come to Him. Alike to those who find worship irksome, and to those for whom worship is the breath of their lives, this sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ brings power and peace and fellowship.

The Church is also the army of God's soldiers. We unite for worship not only, but also for work. There is a community to be bettered, and a world to be won. And just here it is that so many fail us. They might do well to heed these words: "It has got to be said very plainly that if some individuals are really in a position to condemn the Church and have proved it impossible, many more have been proved to be impossible by the Church. There is no greater

testing place of character, especially of the disposition which is able to work with others, than the fellowship of the Church . . . 'they went out from us because they were not of us.' "

It must be obvious to anyone that if Christianity was to spread, to conquer the world, it must be organized. "No religious movement can remain in a bodiless condition," said Harnack. And if the Church has been often on the side of persecution of the true prophets, the side of conservatism and wealth, she has also been the repository of the priceless gospel truth, and she has ever had, hidden somewhere within, the power, when things looked darkest, to thrust up some heroic and gigantic soul who should call at the very least some faithful remnant back into the ways of God. Let us therefore attach ourselves (Father Stanton says truly that there is no place in religious economics for Christians unattached) to that branch of the Church catholic which fits our needs best, taking our place in the family of God as His child, and as His warrior in His army, and there doing our bit for the great Kingdom. We need the Church—need its irksome discipline as well as its inspiring teaching—and, not less, the Church needs us.

Writes my friend, "I need the teaching of Christ's words burned upon my mind. I need His personality to pilot me over very troubled waters. I need all this for the mere mechanics of living; and for the force that makes that machinery go, I need fearfully

the spiritual conviction. I am one of those of little faith, or rather of wavering faith. Talking with you, reading, or thinking, I am able to hold this conviction tight to me, but again and again people say things, or force me into such a mood that I forget, and slip, and feel the vision fading—the hand in my hand relaxing, too."

It is for just such people that I have tried to build, in this chapter, three buttresses to the life abundant.

CHAPTER VII

WANTED—WITNESSES

Somewhere in his book on "The Changing Chinese" Dr. Edward A. Ross makes a remark to the effect that true spiritual religion proceeds from individual to individual. Looking into our religious past it will be found that we have usually been less stimulated by thoughts and ideas, currents and trends of religious movements, than by certain vivid personalities who embodied and bodied forth significant qualities or beliefs. They have not necessarily been great persons—often someone in our family, or our minister—but they have been persons in vital touch with great realities. In some God-given way they were articulate: they could impart their life to us. Let us, then, think here about the deliberate cultivation of "the religion of the articulate."

It begins with caring about people. "The world's misery lies in this," says Rolland, "that a man hardly ever has a companion." There are plenty of people to play around with, but very few deep, worth-while, communicative people. We have to a large extent lost the art of conversation which the eighteenth century had, because we have lost its interest in ideas. But some day we may get it back, because the

modern world, whatever its faults, is to an increasing extent passionately interested in people. We isolated personalities, each housed within an impenetrable shell, signal to one another, discover and enjoy and help one another mostly through words. This primitive instinct for reaching people becomes the purest and noblest desire, next only to the flame of faith itself, in some of the finest spirits that cross our world. "The all-purifying passion must, it is plain, be a passion for individuals."[1] In a rich sentence my friend, Dr. George Dobbin Brown, has put this thought: "The cumulative testimony of all our deepest life-experience is that the ever closer communion of spirit with spirit is the one good." When we communicate truly, we share the vital, the real, the eternal—in a word, our own best, our very selves. Some have felt this impulse; some will need to arouse it or cultivate it, recognizing in it a call of their most deeply implanted nature which has been neglected, and these will enter upon undiscovered fields of friendship by following its leading, nothing doubting.

We have all seen people whose rectitude of life made us admire them, but they were cold; they possessed "goodness to wonder at, not touch." These silent people go through the world buttoned-up. Not a few adopt an unnatural reticence about the deeper things of life, as though it were a good thing. Actually, it is nothing but a limitation, wall-

[1] "Ecce Homo."

ing us off from our fellows. For some it is hard to share things; yet with many one feels that it is simply churlishness from which they should seek to break away, as from a vice. These are as "upright as the palm-tree, but speak not."[2]

Why do we seek out people? If for pleasure, and the things of the mind, why not for religion also? No one was ever more conscious than Henry Drummond of what he called "the surpassing dignity of the human soul"; few have ever understood its needs and satisfactions more fully; and he gave the best hours of his life to doing this. He reverenced deeply the human personality, he reverenced it for its own sake; and for this very reason he could not bear to see it starved, or warped, or smeared with sin, without rising with all the force of his own faith to rescue it.

I am aware that it may be harder to produce sympathy with a program of this sort than with any other idea I have expressed. Some have suffered at the hands of professional religion-mongers. And then our own religious ideas and convictions are so featureless, we are so inured to the prevailing reticence about religion, our hearts are really so cold of concern that people at large should find Christ, that the very thought of "talking to people about religion" is abhorrent to us. But, if we be quite frank with ourselves, is it not more often fear or deadness than modesty, or reverence for the inner

[2]Jeremiah 10:5.

thoughts of others, which keeps us back? It is not so in countries where Christianity is fresh: proportionately to the number of Christians, those who are engaged in this work in China, for example, are many more than in America. It was not so in the beginning when John told Andrew, and Andrew told Simon, Jesus found Philip, and Philip found Nathanael.[2] They did not argue. "Come and see," they said. And those whom they sought to bring came for the sheer persuasiveness of their appeal. Somehow it looks as though we had lost something. If we have really ourselves "seen Jesus" it will come quite naturally, quite inevitably, that we tell others of Him. Lack of real experience, which we can have, and lack of concern about the spiritual lives of others, which we can cultivate, are the two first hindrances to this work.

It will be naturally felt by some that convictions about religion are so diverse, and that the whole subject is so broad and so hard to be dogmatic upon, that it is assuming a good deal to seek to influence others in matters where, after all, one must make up his own mind. "Truth is many-sided; but truth comes not through the silence of all, but by each declaring earnestly and honestly his best. Each thinker recognizes that his own view must be partial, but he puts it forth with energy and earnestness, for it is the truth for which it is given him to stand."

It has to be said that preaching is often not

[2] John 1:41-46.

enough, often goes round people's real problems, seems to fit someone else better than it fits ourselves, and often leads more to unfulfilled resolution than to practical application. And what of those beyond its range altogether? "I venture to say that the Sermon on the Mount did not save one person who heard it," says P. Whitwell Wilson—which testifies to the fact that the weight of even the greatest words ever uttered may have been less than the impact of personality. People do not so much listen to sermons: they listen to men, and a man on the level with them has a better chance than one in the pulpit. We ought to remember how long and how honorable is the list of those who were won in this way. John R. Mott, who is "the leading Christian of this generation," was brought into the Christian life largely by the words of one man. Moody was won by his Sunday-school teacher, Edward Kimball, a Boston business man. Lord Shaftesbury owed his religion primarily to a nurse girl in his home. Beecher was deeply affected by an old Negro servant who prayed for him, and whose prayer was answered.

And then what we need more than we like to admit is jolting. We need to be told the truth about ourselves. The only men who have really helped me, by getting me to do definite things, were not those who applied salve and smoothed things over, but who were not afraid to use a knife and to speak the unvarnished truth. The first Vir-

ginia convention, when they chose delegates to go to the Congress of 1774, assigned duties to various members, one of which was, "Harrison should utter plain truths."[4] We need a whole host of spiritual Harrisons! Christianity is running at second speed when it is not a positive evangelizing force, in a land or in a life.

Some will say that this is an invasion of personality altogether too aggressive, which they do not care to make. It is to be assumed that this objection arises from concern for the best interests of the person we have in mind. Could this have a more practical issue than in leading them into fellowship with Christ? We do not seek to foist our ideas upon them, but to satisfy, in some cases to instigate, a hunger which those who feel it know to be the highest craving of which they are capable. "If one cares to exert the highest influence . . . not merely to dominate another's choices, he must seek such an influence as the other shall be able to recognize as simply the demand of his own sanest and best self."[5] We want to let them see, who do not now see, that, as Vinet said, the soul of man and the Gospel of Christ answer each other like lock and key.[6]

Possibly the greatest objection of all will be that this is delicate work, distinctly the function of a few

[4] Woodrow Wilson, "Life of George Washington."
[5] H. C. King, "Rational Living."
[6] Quoted in James Stalker's "Christian Psychology," p. 37.

choice spirits who can do it, who are "gifted" for it. And there is a good deal to be said for this opinion. There is no more delicate business in the world than relating human lives to God. And when one has seen a person at this work who knows "the rationale of conversion," as Drummond called it, and who does it supremely well, it makes him all but despair of ever doing it with success. But this arises partly from a feeling that this one choice spirit is doing it in the only way that it can be done, that we must therefore do it in this way, or not at all. I know the temptation very well; it is the envy of imitation, and Dr. Johnson said that no man was ever great by imitation. No more is he successful in trying to follow here the ways of others. And one thing becomes quite evident to those who pierce beneath the surface, which is that these "gifted" persons were not particularly gifted after all. Drummond's gifts were scientific primarily; like all the rest, he fought for his knowledge of souls. First, they recognized the need. Then, by the mystery of sympathy, they sought entrance into the inner problems of others—timid and bungling they were at first, no doubt, but gradually, by reading and talking with those who understood, by observing and trying, they learned a little of "the science of the soul" which Drummond pleaded should be better known. We must remember that there are cases in which the health plays a large part, and where a Christian physician can be of infinite help. But Dr. McComb,

whose very field this is, speaking rather of the bearing of the spiritual upon the physical than vice versa, says: "Every neurologist knows that in the great class of disorders where moral and psychic factors are at work, it is impossible to exaggerate the uplifting and unifying influence of personality."[7] We may begin equipped only with a sort of spiritual "first aid"; but here is a science strangely open to being learned by experiment. Those who treat failure as the impostor Kipling says that it is, who with real love and strong sympathy and consecrated good breeding—above all, armed with that fortifying sense that we are cooperating with God and doing the work which of all work He most wants done, yet cannot do without us poor mortals—to these success, through Him, does come, and lives are changed.

This work needs preparation. And the first thing is this: "Create in *me* a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within *me*. . . . *Then* will I teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee." Our own sin is ever the worst enemy of those who get so far as to want to "catch men." And until every conscious bit of it is cleared out, forgiven, and left behind, until we are ourselves without barriers of our making between ourselves and God, He is not able to use us for His agents. I once asked Frank Buchman how to prepare for a certain piece of religious work, and he said, "Prepare yourself. You are the great problem." "Only

[7] "Christianity and the Modern Mind," p. 136.

as man lives in surrender to the Divine Life is he able to master himself and love all other men with the measure of love God bears to all His children."

Prayer is the very life of this labor. And it will be a revelation little short of miraculous to find how our prayer takes on reality as we have in mind definite cooperation with God in definite work for one definite person. The reason many of us do not pray is that we have not really anything to pray for. It is a blessed thing to hold up a life in sustained prayer to God, until we ourselves are set alight with the fire of His holy hopes for that person. And all too few know that blessedness.

Of the preparation of the Twelve, it has been said, "He did not send them to college, or teach them theology, as we read it today. He said no word to them about architecture and organs and painted windows and ritual, but kept them near to Himself, where they could best learn—first, the need of the people; and secondly, the Redeemer's power to save."[8] And S. D. Gordon wrote, "It still remains true that the one chief thing that fits a man for any part in missionary service is that he has been caught by the Jesus passion, which comes only as his life and powers and training are flamed and swept by the Holy Spirit."

And how do you do it? It may help to keep our object in view if we choose five words which will cover the usual stages of development: Confidence;

[8] P. Whitwell Wilson, "The Christ We Forget," p. 201.

Confession; Conviction; Conversion; Conservation.[9] You may feel this a bit formidable and ready-made, but it is good to have the main points fixed.

Now no one wants to wade in all at once. And so some ordinary friendly intercourse is almost always necessary. Kindnesses done to people in little ways help; and Jesus, reversing this idea, put Himself under obligations to the Woman of Samaria and, by a kind of courteous exchange, for a drink of well-water gave her the living water, of which if a man drink he shall never thirst again.[10] We want to be personal as far as possible, giving ourselves wholly to this friend for the time as though there were no other in the world, and working round to the deeper aspects of life as occasion offers.

The second stage follows this quite naturally. My friend, who came most naturally into this desire to share Christ with others, wrote of a discovery here: "I have found a way to draw confession from others. It is to confess first myself." And this is the surest way for those who have not so wonderfully attuned themselves to others that they get the heart's secrets which have never been told to anyone else—the kind of secrets that are cleansed by being aired a bit. I believe (my experience with about three hundred Chinese boys confirms it, and, by the way, they form not a bad cross-section of human nature) that

[9] For these words I am indebted to Frank N. D. Buchman.

[10] This story in John 4 is worthy of repeated study in this connection.

a very frank sharing of one's inner struggles, temptations, and sins is the best thing here. One need not always go into detail, but sometimes one must. It produces the atmosphere of confession, so that it is easy for the other person to speak of real problems, and to bring them into the light. Depending mostly on prayer and on your "gift of sympathy," which you can cultivate wonderfully, you will be able in a measure to do what Drummond put as a cornerstone in relating people to Christ. "To draw souls one by one, to buttonhole them and steal from them the secret of their lives, to talk them clean out of themselves, to read them off like a page of print, to pervade them with your spiritual essence and make them transparent, this is the spiritual science which is so difficult to acquire, and so hard to practice." Drummond himself most wonderfully acquired it, hearing from men such black confessions, he said, as made him want to go home and change his clothes. The Roman Church may have abused it, but it laid hold upon a great purger of the human heart in confession.

By "conviction" two things are meant: conviction first of sin, and then a growing assurance that Christ can meet the need. This may take time, the loan of books, introduction to someone who may be able to answer very hard problems—though we ought soon to be arriving where we can ourselves give account of the faith that is in us—prayer, and very earnest pressing upon them of the *fact* of our

conversion and our own fundamental beliefs. Moody said, "Do not talk an inch beyond your experience," but use that for everything there is in it. It is the one thing *you* can be perfectly sure of, and you are on unassailable ground, for only yourself and God know what happened.

Conversion may mean essentially the same thing for the person you are seeking to win as it did for yourself. In China when boys decided they wanted to make the great adventure, we used to kneel down for a prayer of dedication and consecration to Christ; and they in their own words and language, and I in mine, asked for what we both needed, and they got up Christians. That was the beginning of the crusade. There was joy in their faces, and a glad heart within, because they had done the best thing men can do here below. It is always so.

Lastly, they want means to live this life of grace. Too much stress cannot be laid on private prayer and Bible study, and public uniting with the Church. And there is no more empowering habit in the lives of those who seek to live the Christ-life than this "fishing for men," as Jesus called it. One need not wait till he is a mature saint to begin. I have known Chinese boys to win a friend the very day of their own conversion. The effect of this in strengthening one's own spiritual convictions is very great; and as a force for toning up our lives and keeping us up to standard, I know nothing like it, simply because one can go on reading the Bible and making a pretense

of prayer and public worship while sin is eating out the heart. But shorn Samsons win no converts. "Such as I have give I thee."

Dealing with these wonderful, lovable people whom God has put round us, let us see them as they are, but with a vision of what they might be, under God; not blind to the ugliest of facts, but full, too, of tremendous hopefulness and confidence in them. It is atheism to be otherwise; it is working on a human basis, and leaving God out of the question. When the knife is needed, as often we all need it, one finds by experience that one can say very frank things with a smile. Let us not forget the words of the shrewd and great-hearted Paul, that we should give "not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls,"[11] sharing our best, and not hiding our worst —humble, earnest, frank, glad, and above all loving.

It is the greatest work in the world.

[11] I Thess. 2:8.

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